



Encouraging A Love Of Reading In A Digital Age

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Reading programs that spread the good news.

Encouraging a love of Reading in a Digital Age – or we could say encouraging a love of reading in an era that is defined by an amazing array of technology that includes computers, mobile phones, remote access, smart cards, digital televisions, DVDS, MP3's etc. Alternatively, encouraging a love of reading in a Digital Age can also mean encouraging reading in an age of sensory and informational overload, minimal leisure time, a sometimes almost overwhelming load of work and family pressures and unprecedented constant change. So in an era that is marked by all of these factors why do we seek to encourage a love of reading in a Digital Age.

The reality is that encouraging the love of reading can mean different things to different people. Some view it as a way to ensure that children will learn and become equipped for all the challenges that will meet them in the 21st century. Others see it as a way of creating strong communities through the discussion and interaction that is a hallmark of reading groups. Yet others will see it as a way to improve the lives of the isolated, the disadvantaged, the uneducated. Fundamentally however, encouraging a love of reading for most of us is about sharing the good news about the sheer joy of reading and fostering a genuine understanding of its benefits.

The question is – how do we do that?

To answer that question, we should firstly examine the situation as it is to date. We have all heard of the great hurdles and difficulties that we are facing – alarming literacy figures, teenagers that won't read, flat borrowings in libraries, stagnant book sales, copyright issues. There is a very long list of these critical issues all of which need to be identified, debated, considered and acted upon. However, we should not forget that there is also a world of good news out there about reading in a digital age.

In Australia alone there is lots of good news mixed with the bad.

For example:

- ◆ Reading has recently become a high focus item on the political agenda
- ◆ There is a building boom in libraries around the country
- ◆ Books have never been more affordable
- ◆ Information about books their authors, their topics, their reviews is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- ◆ Print on demand is now available and can bring old titles alive again
- ◆ The 2002/3 ABS statistics show that sales of Australian books are growing

There is an enormous range of available books – it seems as though there is a book about every topic under the sun and the positive news is that reading in Australia has never been so accessible and so widely promoted.

The question for all of us to consider therefore, should be how can we best build on the good news and use the tricks of a digital age to help to continue to foster this love of reading and help to solve some of the critical issues.

The answer to this thorny question may lie, in part, in creative processes. John Holden's Demos Report into Creative Reading tells us that "reading is a creative activity in itself and frequently an important element in other creative processes." So it is interesting to note that the Reading program successes that have emerged in the last few years often come from creative, imaginative ideas formed as a result of a desire to foster and encourage a love of reading and to address a perceived need. Creative reading program ideas abound and libraries everywhere are embracing them as a vehicle to encourage a love of reading. Often the successes are linked to both the creativity of the idea and to the creative way that they were delivered through the tricks and tools of a digital age.

The Big Read

Most of you will be familiar with the UK's 2003 BBC Big Read program.

The program aimed to revitalise reading in the UK and was very successful in capturing widespread attention. It was fun, interesting, offered everyone the chance to be included and to have their say by voting. It was available widely through digital equipment and participants could use their latest tools or toys to be involved. They could both find the information and participate in the program through the medium of their choice – on television, radio, on the Internet, in their local library. It was a modern creative program for a modern digital era.

The outcome of that program was that an enormous ¾ million votes were received for the top 21 books and the flow on effect continued long after the voting.

The program lifted the profile of reading in a digital age. It reminded communities that reading was still relevant, a very important and popular activity and that it could be accessed through the new digital technology.

Other examples are occurring around the world and even nearer to home. The ABC is currently searching for "My favourite book" – voting is available online and through postcards.. and the voting is only step one – it is anticipated that the final list will cause lots of discussion and interest.

But the BBC's Big Read and the ABC's " My Favourite Book" are big national programs and what are the realities for library services both big and small. The answer is that reading can be encouraged within local communities on much smaller budgets. However, they require clear goals, imagination, dedication and a willingness to show that reading is moving with the times and can embrace the available current technology.

One area that this has happened is in the " One Book" programs that have taken off around the world with hundreds of towns and cities (especially in America) hosting a version of the program. The program, born from an idea by Nancy Pearl from the Seattle Public Library, aims to encourage communities to read and discuss the same book at the same time – like a giant bookclub. It is a clever concept that encourages reading and helps to build communities while being flexible enough to be moulded to fit individual situations, needs and requirements.

One Book One Brisbane

Brisbane City Council has now been operating the program for 3 years. Based on the Chicago model our program has been designed to support and endorse the importance and joy of Reading while encouraging debate and discussion about social issues and about the value of writing in our community. For 5 weeks each year, we effectively create a Brisbane bookclub, we engage readers in discussion (often controversial and provocative) and we provide opportunities for readers to meet and engage in a range of reading activities.

During that time, we focus all our energies and resources into the program. We marry the benefits of the digital age with some of our tried and true practices. For example, we notify customers through e-mail, ezines, a strong online presence and through an extensive program of media exposure that includes bus and bus shelters advertising while also promoting through the traditional methods of regular mail and library distribution. Additionally, we also produce a broad range of colourful, eye-catching collateral that is designed to capture the imagination and get people talking. We place this collateral all over the city – in libraries, cafes, bookstores, shopping centres, at railway stations – anywhere, where people stop and meet. We hope to not only capture the converted but also the unconverted – those that have not yet learnt the joys and benefits that exist in a book.

To support the notification process, a creative and varied program of events is designed – the idea is to have something for as many people as possible – readers and non-readers, young and all , male and female. The activities and resources include a comprehensive online presence, storytime sessions,

interactive pantomimes, book discussions, readers notes, school resource kits, morning teas, displays, film events, partnership events, readings. Another key organisational strategy is to include creative "hook" events for the program. Events that will unashamedly capture the community imagination and the media attention. We aim to successfully seed the program concepts into the community and ultimately raise the profile of reading.

For example, in 2003, we ran historic bus tours based on the winning book ***The Mayne Inheritance" by Rosamond Siemon.*** These tours were wildly popular and the demand far outstripped our supply. Readers and non readers joined the tours and once they were aboard, we were able to discuss the story, the program, read passages from the book and talk about the benefits of the library. An amended version of this event was also held this year to give readers the chance to discuss ***Johnno by David Malouf*** and ***Girl Most Likely by Rebecca Sparrow.*** As a result, there are now plans for a commercial operation to operate these reading tours all year and encourage reading about Brisbane.

The One Book One Brisbane program also strongly encourages local partnerships each year – we provide community groups with resources and support and then we build their events and ideas into the official program. Local councillors are encouraged to become involved in the program and where possible, other key community figures. The benefit of this means that they "spread the word" for us, often discuss the program with the media and can sometimes help with the resourcing.

Finally, we recognise the critical part that local authors can play in the creativity of our city. Over 20 writing workshops are hosted by local authors during the program and they encourage new authors by discussing creative writing and publishing and their own writing styles and successes.

So how is the program tracking.

In 2004 the program achieved:

- 8000 borrowings of the winning books through our libraries
- 4500 entries in the competition
- 4500 attendances at events in our libraries

Our awareness figure has not yet been received but is expected to be considerably more than the 2003 figure of 34%.

However, the program is not just about numbers. It is about encouraging a love of reading and about building communities through reading. The enthusiastic letters and emails that we receive from previously disengaged readers are often, I believe, the true barometer of the program.

Summer Reading for adults and children.

Our other major program each year is the Summer Reading program. We do support the national program but in January 2004, we expanded the program. Summer Reading was promoted as a program for adults and children as we were of the view that by involving the adults we could open the dialogue about reading within families. Additionally, we recognised that many adults are also holidaying over the summer months and have in fact the time to enjoy reading.

Through a partnership with a local writing organisation called Fantastic Queensland, we developed an adult component and " themed" the program to the Fantasy genre. Speculative Fiction was promoted for adults and fantasy for children. The adult

component included opportunities to discuss graphic novels, myths and legends and writing fantasy stories.

This summer our program will be about Crime stories for adults and Spies and Detectives for children. We plan to host a range of sessions about forensics, criminal photography and crime protection for adults. The children's program will include science experiments, pantomimes and other "spy" activities.

Again we'll support the program with bright, interesting marketing material and will promote widely. There will be a strong online presence and we will concentrate on providing lots of reading recommendations.

While our programs may be too large for smaller library services—everything can be adapted to smaller communities and smaller budgets. From the Teddy Bears of Utrecht, to the Rub a Dub – Read a book in the Tub concept, from BookCrossings to Reading Walls there are ideas and suggestions that you can creatively explore and implement and that may just fuel that spark of interest that will encourage new readers. In 2002, John Stanley wrote an article for the *Incite* magazine that told us that to get your message across, we need to be pretty savvy to ensure that the message sticks in their (the communities) mind. Reading programs are a great way to help that reading message to stick.

Encouraging a love of reading in the Digital age is quite a challenge. The pace of change and the sometimes fickle needs of our communities mean that the program today is tomorrow's old news and new ideas and opportunities have to be constantly found and explored. Reading programs are just one of the vehicles that you can use to reach a large audience and "spread the good news". Their scope is only limited by your own imagination and creativity and they can be altered and changed at any time to fit any group. They can also successfully keep pace with our changing world. If I you haven't tried a reading program, let me recommend them to you.

References

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